Camelot for Educational Administration

Like King Arthur, superintendents may find that team management is not all happily ever-aftering.

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Most romanticists are well-versed in the tales and ideals of King Arthur's court, that fabled and still sparkling utopia known as Camelot. It doesn't seem to matter that the historical Arthur was simply a Celtic warlord whose great military skill was conspicuous in the midst of chaotic 5th century Norman England. Legendary Arthur survives: general, politician, lover, philosopher. An extraordinary man living in glamorous times. Also legendary is his Round Table, one of the first attempts at team management in recorded history.

As old as Camelot is, so too is team management, and we still haven't worked out the bugs. Those in educational administration should heed the lessons Arthur painfully learned too late, when his downfall was assured.

Most of the blame for the decline of Camelot lies correctly at Arthur's feet. The decisions he made, those he didn't, and those he trusted to others were crucial in the determination of Camelot's evolution.

Medieval England was characterized by upheaval. Literally hundreds of feudal lords, who lay claim to tiny fiefdoms, raped the resources of their domains. They survived through and despite conflict. Their subjects fared not well.

Consider, in parallel, a large suburban school district, where principals supervise their buildings without central office checks and balances, and in which so-called central administrators fail to coordinate their operations with lateral managers. The picture is an administrative nightmare. Such chaos is not atypical of many educational organizations; further, the disarray defeats cost-effectiveness.

The Round Table
King Arthur conceived the Round Table to solve a great problem: how to draw upon the strengths of the smaller warlords for the benefit of the people they ruled. If the feudal lords were uncooperative in this venture, he could simply eliminate them. Arthur believed that once he had his knights at the Table everything else would follow.

A contemporary superintendent might easily adopt Arthur's reasoning by introducing the attractive and expeditious concept of team management. The reorganization involved can at once be a cosmetic peace offering to those who feel the shape-up most, and a tidy little package to present to the board of education. Team management appears to present one (if not the) irresistible cure-all for the generally stagnant ills of educational administration. And, on paper at least, the superintendent can prove that cooperation and coordination exist.

But why should the troops cooperate? Has the "new order" developed from within? Possibly, but not likely, since our superintendent probably hand-picked at least some of the cabinet administrators to ensure success of the planned reorganization. Yet even with an established cabinet, those at the top will be willing to give their allegiance to the super. Some call that loyalty. The cynical view would be expediency and opportunism. A moderate view might be a combination of both.

Arthur, too, had his cabinet: friends and family whose power was an extension of his own; Lancelot is the most famous. (One might refer to them as the inner circle of the Round Table.) Surrounded by his followers, and secure in his personal power, Arthur miscalculated the importance of loyalty from the outer fringes of his Round Table.

Similarly, superintendents whose top managers are either beholden to them for their positions or who are still seeking their own level within the administration might lose sight of the resentments of the old guard. A recurring Achilles' heel.

But here it is: team management—and already flawed, at that. A definition of the concept is due. Team management entails the kind of group information exchange that theoretically leads to consensus decision making. In addition to the obvious troop mollification benefits that emerge from such collaboration, the refined decisions themselves should favorably affect the whole field of governance.

Team management also implies differentiated staffing—that is, specialists whose work is not duplicated elsewhere; and it suggests that individuals assume almost total responsibility for their sectors. In its totality, team management is a double-edged sword: high-level performance and accountability are demanded in return for free reign in one's jurisdiction. Cabinet administrators will tend to react to their departmental freedom as though they have a sacred mission. They are eager to carry out the superintendent's will. But given carte blanche they are threatening figures—big guns—to the rest of the management team.

Question: What happens to the team? Answer: The "team" will work in committee fashion to develop programs and policies to benefit the entire organization. The accountability of individual administrators will be judged not by the team but by a superior, through evaluation. At least, one hopes so.

In any reorganization, the most immediate changes are procedural. Action—any action—must be visible. Such changes usually generate a lot of paper. Lower administrators are likely to view their daily interoffice mail with dread: what new directives will have been dreamed up overnight? The greatest danger is the likelihood that top managers will step on each other's toes in their haste to make progress. There are bound to be misreadings of intent and unplanned breaches of territoriality. And when the contradictions are overtly displayed on paper, no one misses them, least of all those who resented the initial reorganization. They need only sit back watchfully until the smoke clears.

The key to surviving these growing pains lies in the hands of the superintendent, who must exercise control over inter-territorial squabbles. Any abdication of that responsibility may irreversibly erode the superintendent's power. It is too soon to trust the infant team management system to solve its own problems. Matrix management—which refers disputing administrators to each other, bypassing the superintendent's jurisprudence—is a system requiring managerial maturity; in the fetal stages of team management, the only probable "given" may be instability.

Misunderstandings that go unresolved only fester. Among those whose systemic power approaches the absolute, these conflicts are timebombs. The popular misconception that the team concept hampers individual power is a shallow see-it-on-paper view. The team applies to the gestalt of the organization, not to individual small-segment decision making. And, unfortunately, it is the day-to-day building decisions that operate schools. If decisions are not subject to supervisory review at some point, then all the cosmetic palaver at the conference table won't make an appreciable difference in the classroom.

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Life at Court

Obviously, what’s under discussion here is trust. Getting back to Camelot, Arthur had four stepbrothers who were all territorial lords and members of the Round Table. But the half brothers resented Arthur because his father had slain their father. Despite Arthur’s determination to let bygones be bygones, the bitterness remained.

Another parallel: in the new team management organization, at least some of the “old” administrators will be welcomed because the new superintendent needs them. They, however, may not trust the superintendent. Some of their peers may have fallen beneath his or her axe in the reorganization. Are they next? The wariness simmers just below the surface.

It is only natural that the superintendent will trust those managers he or she has personally hired. In turn, that inner circle will tend quite naturally to ostracize those who are not the chosen few. Taken to its next logical step, a cabinet member of the inner circle who makes a mistake is likely to lose the trust of his or her peers. Outwardly, they will band together to protect the stray sheep and the “team”; behind closed doors, they will abandon the offender. No one cares to be tainted by the errors of another. Indeed, the superintendent, who has staked his administrative prowess on these people, will consider the offender, in effect, a traitor. In the not-so-distant future, the superintendent will be willing to sacrifice that individual in order to preserve his or her own image.

After the first flaw in utopia has been exposed, top managers will be very careful to note cracks in each other’s veneers. In dealing as closely together in central office as the team management concept demands, this is natural and inevitable. The driving motivation, after all, is power, and entrenchment in it.

Stepping back to review at this point, a pessimistic observer will say that team management is doomed from the start. Indeed, that is the message. Team management is ideal in concept; in operation, the human personality weighs too heavily to allow its sustenance. Unless vigilant controlled, it stands the risk of quick collapse.

Those in a position to make it work generally have risen not through team management but through conventional ambition (team management being a fairly recent fad in contemporary education). That ambition surfaces naturally, for example, through outside influences that affect the system. Because the superintendent and the cabinet are specialists, they each will be called on at some point to “show their stuff.” Very likely, they will do so easily. Among peers, competition is strongest; the urge to out-do arises. Some grow more powerful than others. Seeds of doubt can be planted in the superintendent’s head about one or more of these people, by one or more of them. After a few months, personalities will be defined; natural friendships emerge. Allegiances follow. Don’t forget, too, board of education members have administrative favorites.

The superintendent’s partisans will be there by virtue of their carefully nurtured power bases. And, within this group of decision makers, there may well be an appreciable lack of elbow room. Stated plainly, there simply may not be enough space at the top for all of this high-powered management. It must be remembered that these are the cream of the cream, persons who have faced the competition of high-level peers and have proven themselves. They have high everything: high energy, high ability, high motivation, high sensitivity to political machinations. That power is not easily harnessed in any situation. In a team management system—with only matrix checks—it is almost impossible to control.

Arthur experienced the same kind of problem. Lancelot was his right-hand man; Guinevere was just as powerful in her way. The stepbrothers were a formidable wedge. Arthur found himself watching his top people over his shoulder, when he had planned that those energies would be directed toward the total organization.

Unless the superintendent can exercise a bit of dictatorial supervision—and early on in the infant organization—the system won’t work. If, like Arthur, the superintendent becomes structurally and morally bound to matrix management and therefore noninterference, checks and balances will not exist, and team management may be lost.

Right and Might

The heroic Arthur was a soldier. As such, he believed that force could be channelled for the greater success of his political structure, and ultimately for the greater good of the people it governed. In his terms, Might could be used to promote Right. This was the basis for the development of the Code of Chivalry. The gory jousts and challenges fought by the knights all were performed in the spirit of defending the weak. In actuality, Arthur allowed his knights to wield the same kind of brutal force over their subjects as they had before Camelot. Arthur let them vent, in other words; the catch was they could do so only in prescribed circumstances.

Right by Might is an unsuccessful recurring theme in world history. Unsuccessful, because the concept is fundamentally unsound; Arthur himself proved it. Several facts eventually became clear to the king. First, the knights had accepted team management because it gave them freedom to direct their own territories. However they had never accepted the flip side: that they would be expected to give their allegiance to Camelot.

Second, Arthur knew his power had been siphoned off by those cabinet members who were upwardly motivated. That was his crucial mistake; he’d called every possible means to achieve his objectives, but he’d failed to monitor the system when supervision was most needed. He’d shunned interference in power plays until they were beyond interference.

From both of these, point three: By the time Arthur exerted his right as leader of the system, some of that power had eroded; Arthur’s dream was in danger of collapse.

Arthur believed in the goodness and integrity of the Camelot/team management concept. Arthur was team manager. Threats to it were direct threats to him. Arthur the soldier responded with self-defense; Arthur the human being pushed back (might for right) in the areas where his power still mattered above all else. Those areas, naturally, were further down in the power structure.

Arthur’s greatest inconsistency involved Lancelot and Guinevere. When Arthur discovered their affair, his duty was clear: he must expose the pair as traitors. Instead, he looked the other way since exposure of the lovers would ultimately destroy Camelot. The king’s lack of action served only to cause greater distrust and paranoia among his
Is Chivalry Dead?
As is the way in any political sphere, life goes on while Machiavellian figures battle in the inner sanctum. In the beginning, Camelot worked. So does contemporary team management. We've already acknowledged procedural renovations in a new organization. Inevitably, some of them will be more functional than the ones they replace, and a new progress becomes apparent. Cabinet members' talents will be manifested in the outwardly smooth running of the administrative system.

However, time has a way of creating new wrinkles, and flaws become magnified by those who initially were in the vanguard of the reorganization. As team camaraderie decays, so too does the importance of the achievements at stake. What worked in the beginning will not work now. Productivity has become the victim of the very system designed to nurture it. The initial administrative system has eroded beyond its original form. Pure team management has evolved away from utopia.

The Holy Grail is lost again.

Conclusion
What occurred in Arthur's Camelot may occur in any given team management organization. It is quite possibly evolutionary and, if so, unalterable. With proper supervision, however, a contemporary Round Table might last for two or perhaps three years. What Arthur found out, and what any administrator will discover, is this: team management is a utopian administrative theory that can be physically constructed and that will result in reactive productivity, but will not be stable enough to endure, at least not in its original form.

Team management requires a high degree of democracy, with a smidgeon of dictatorship thrown in. It is built on skill, trust, and individual responsibility—highly subjective and highly unpredictable qualities.

Team management is Catch-22. By virtue of its very philosophy—which fosters initiative, ambition and consequently, power—it is susceptible to collapse. Consider the executives who will end up in the cabinet as we noted before; they are highly motivated persons who rose to that level not through team effort, but via their own talents and ambitions. They might not have cut any throats on the way up, but generally they were upwardly motivated. The team management system gives these ambitious persons the power to continue that climb. It does not incorporate enough safeguards to prevent power plays, unless strong evaluative procedures are also included.

Is the effort to create such a structure worth it, in view of the necessary money and upheaval? It could be, depending on the shape of the system currently in operation. If the aim is a quick, albeit cosmetic, facelift of the organization, then the immediate rewards will be elimination of deadwood, pressure on remaining staff to either produce or be steamrolled, and a by-product of immediate step-up in productivity. Initially, the group will fall into line.

Even though the pure team management system falls apart after awhile, it is not entirely a waste. New procedures will have been instituted; perhaps a degree of accountability will have been achieved indirectly. Managerial structure will be defined, at least on paper. As noted earlier, the utopia will end, to be replaced by a system less dazzling but perhaps more permanent.

A theoretical Camelot could evolve into a more stable managerial system later on. Team management could evolve into a differentiated department administration, with accountability placed on the top managers. As long as the system is highly controlled, it parallels what exists in most educational structures. At least in that setting, a watchful and diligent superintendent can interject influence when and where he or she chooses. The superintendent is not hampered by a system of governance that limits his or her supervisory duties. Accountability can be infused into the system; yet the superintendent's own authority can be protected.

King Arthur and a contemporary counterpart could easily quaff a few grogs over team management war stories. Their ideology is not unworthy; it simply lacks permanence in real life. Nevertheless, the 1500-year-old concept remains attractive. It will undoubtedly continue to snare sincere leaders in years to come.